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ABSTRACT

A variety of desperate questions come from frustrated teaching assistants who want to teach well but have fallen into the widening gap between postmodern theory and daily practice. Too often, TA training consists of an overwhelming load of postmodern theory insufficiently counterbalanced by practical methods. Does postmodernism preclude teaching methods? Instead of issuing dictates about writing, Helene Cixous would have the writing instructor encourage questions about the nature of the knowledge a student writer is trying to transmit. The following suggestions may be useful for writing teachers: (1) focus on reading discourse as well as writing it; (2) ask students to identify the discourse of authority for various situations (the teachers' role here might be one of devil's advocate as students first look at surface elements such as format and grammar rather than style, their approach to the subject, and the organization of ideas); (3) examine texts to see what is "absent" and to find traces of what is "present"; (4) determine what voices are possible in the text; (5) question whether readers should hear more than one voice; (6) compare the different meanings students as readers construct from the texts; and (7) examine what student texts say to readers and determine how student texts stand up to the above questions. Following these suggestions allows teachers to offer students the tools they need to be full participants in the power struggle of writing. In doing so, they appropriately teach the questions, not the answers. In postmodern society, the answers will inevitably fail. (SAM)

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Issues in TA Training: Does Postmodernism Preclude Teaching Structure?

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Let me begin with some questions we have all heard:

> "Why am I not allowed to teach strategies for good openers?"
>
> "How can I teach students to write if I can't talk to them about the structural building blocks of composing?"
>
> "But my students need to know basics before they can even recognize their own voices. How can I help them?"
>
> "How can I be politically correct and still teach?"

These and other desperate questions come from frustrated teaching assistants who want to teach well but have fallen into the widening gap between postmodern theory and daily practice.

The role of structure in the postmodern composition classroom has become an issue of greater and greater importance as the gap grows larger. Foucault, radical feminine discourse, multiculturalism, dialogics, and other fallout from the postmodern explosion have made us rethink our relationship to our own texts and our own pedagogies. As Thomas Kuhn would say, we are in the midst of a revolution: a paradigm shift that is re-inventing how we teach writing. But in any revolution--no matter how positive--there are victims. In today's universities, the victims are often the teaching assistants and their students.

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Too frequently, new TAs enter teaching workshops where they hear how not to teach, what not to do, and when student writing does not work. For these novice instructors, who are more than likely nervous about teaching in the first place, such negative advice plunges them willy-nilly into the chaos of the classroom without adequate tools to steady themselves, let alone their students. Their TA Training consists of an overwhelming load of postmodern theory insufficiently counter-balanced by practical methods.

Does postmodernism preclude teaching methods? Is it possible to discuss pedagogy in the same breath with postmodern theory?

These are difficult questions, but questions that deserve answers instead of the sleight of hand response so often associated with post-structuralism. In our theorizing, we sometimes forget that there are people out there, people who are in painful situations, people who need more than a theory to get them through their daily task of teaching writing. If we follow postmodern thought to its (il)logical conclusion, writing cannot be taught at all. But if we are going to teach it--or at least continue to have classes with the word "writing" attached to them--we must construct ways to help our teachers do their jobs.

Even radical French feminist Helene Cixous admits that she uses "rhetorical discourse" (her term for the "discourse of mastery") when she teaches. In her infamous debate with Catherine Clement about whether writing can or should transmit objective knowledge, Cixous suggests that "There is a drawback we all know as teachers, which is the almost insurmountable difficulty of occupying a position of mastery."

Nonetheless, she advises, as masters we must "take a thousand precautions" against using our positions of power to repress or exclude. As teachers we should "be able to function on the level of knowledge without knowing" because to know assumes an absolute and creates something beyond question, creates something sacred. Instead of presenting THE WAY TO COOK, as Julia Child would say, Cixous suggests encouraging questions about the nature of the knowledge one is trying to transmit. Does someone allied with a certain knowledge want to communicate it to others?....Why does one want to communicate it to others?....Does it serve any purpose?...Etc.

Such questioning sets up a dialogue, rather than a one-way transmission. The teacher becomes facilitator and participant, not master, although in responding to and asking questions, the teacher enables students to ask better and better questions, creating their own knowledge in the process.

Perhaps by exploring this postmodern approach to teaching with our TAs, we can give them a pedagogy that is genuinely useful. At the risk of sounding overly hierarchical and logocentric, I would like to present the following suggestions for writing teachers:

1. <u>Focus on reading discourse as well as writing it</u>. Students who want to know how to write should first know how writing works for readers. Readers have the power to create new meaning each time they read a text. They should understand that the reading/writing connec-

tion is a power struggle between the writer who wants to impart a certain meaning via the discourse and the reader who brings an entirely new context to the words. There may be a great difference among what is meant, what is said, and what is understood. These are lessons in relativity that writers should understand before they attempt to transmit knowledge through written discourse.

2. Ask students to identify the discourse of authority for various situations. What are its characteristics? What role should it play? What does it exclude? What do they need to know to master it? What does mastering it mean? Identifying these "discourses of mastery" or "rhetorics" (to quote Cixous again) may require quite a bit of questioning and work on the part of both teacher and students. The teacher's role here might be that of devil's advocate as students at first may look to surface elements such as format and grammar. They need to be encouraged to dig deeper into the discourse to see the assumptions behind it and the way these assumptions are reflected in the style, the approach to the subject, and the organization of ideas. This excavation process leads directly to the third suggestion--

3. Examine texts to see what is "absent" to find traces of what is "present." What choices has the author made about what to include and what to exclude? What is left out and why? By leaving out these things, what assumptions has the author made and what agenda does the author have?

4. What are the "voices" possible in the text? Are there more than one? Does the voice (or voices) sound similar to those of the students? What voices might set up a dialogue with the author? Of course, to discuss these issues the students first have to come to agreement about what "voice" means--no small task in itself. Do we have a voice that is unique to ourselves or is our voice constructed from the social milieu?

5. Should readers hear more than one voice? If only one voice is present in the text, what are the possibilities for dialogue? Are the readers encouraaged to engage with the author's voice in any way? Does that voice preclude the possibility of multivocal response? Is dialogue with the ideas presented in the text necessary?

6. What meanings do the students as readers construct from the texts? Once students have read a text carefully--have done "deep reading"--they should be able to construct meaning from it and knowledge about it. They should be able to understand not only what it means to them, but also be able to explain how it means and why it means what it does. Understanding these things enable students to see writing as a continuing developmental process of creating meaning that is never static even when printed on the page and divorced from the writer.

7. What do student texts say to readers? How do student texts stand up to these questions? Of course, one benefit of all of these questions is that students will begin to think more carefully about the rhetoric inherent in their own writing. By looking at their own work with the same critical eye they use to respond to "professional" discourse, they begin to respect themselves more as writers and learn more about how to write for actual readers.

These suggestions can form a pedagogy that is useful for new--and experienced--writing teachers. They can provide a

"method" of teaching that allows TAs to feel grounded and confident in their classroom planning, while not enocuraging them to go into class with a set of prescribed solutions for the question of how to write.

But even with this list of suggestions as a heuristic for thinking about and teaching writing, the question of structure remains. What about teaching students how to write effective openers, middles, and closers? How about paragraphing? Heaven forbid we discuss grammar.

I am struggling with these issues myself. I admit to being in severe pain about it. It seems to me that we should teach our students the hallmarks of effective writing: This is what a thesis does, this is what a good transition looks like, here are some ways to support an assertion, and so forth. But in the light of postmodern theory, these pedogogical techniques seem so directive, so fascist. They imply that I have "mastery" and that there is a "discourse of authority" to be learned. Over the years, I have taken a good deal of flak for believing that these things have a place in the composition classroom, especially in freshman composition or other introductory writing classes. But I also have noticed that TAs, often surreptitiously, love come to my office to talk about techniques for teaching these skills and even want graduate classes in stylistics and grammar.

After much guilt for having such conversations both in and out of the classroom, I think I am coming to realize that master-

ing and teaching these skills is not antithetical to post-modernism.

Certainly before one engages in dialogue about writing one first must have a common language. If we recognize the basics of communication, we can then discuss how the thesis works or why certain transitional devices are effective. The term "rhetoric" means more than simply the writer's political agenda; it also means the tools writers use to construct possible meanings. Before we discuss the architecture of meaning, then, we need to have the appropriate tools to build it in the first place.

Writing teachers who are weighed down by postmodern guilt when they mention the word "structure" in class should be liberated from such a burden. Certainly, presenting students with THE WAY TO WRITE A THESIS is not helpful, but discussing the nature of effective theses <u>is</u> useful, as is exploring why certain theses are effective, and as is presenting various examples for further discussion and exploration. Presenting structure in this way parallels the multi-faceted techniques discussed earlier for understanding the "rhetoric" of discourse. By questioning and responding to different examples, students develop a keen eye and ear for what <u>choices</u> writers make. They also begin to understand that they as writers have similar choices and that these choices have ramifications for readers.

I believe we need to take a serious look at the issues of poststructuralist thought and pedagogy, of theory and actual

practice. We need to determine if there is a productive way to rescue our teaching assistants and our students from the chaos, or at least provide them with sufficient tools to deal with it themselves. By asking students to respond to discourse as readers, and to read below the surface; by asking students to engage in dialogue with the discourse, the teacher, and each other; and by asking students to resist the primacy of one example, of one WAY TO WRITE; we are giving them the necessary tools they need to be full participants in the power struggle of writing. In short, we are appropriately teaching the <u>questions</u> not the answers. In postmodern society, the answers will invariably fail.